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REVITALIZING A COMMUNITY:

Creating a Pollination Garden for the City of Gary, Indiana

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Kelli Varney is currently a fifth-year student in the Landscape Architecture Program within the College of Agriculture at Purdue University. In this article, she describes the design process that was used in creating a Pollination Garden for the Progressive Community Church located in Gary, Indiana, and how this design is one step in the rejuvenation of an entire community.

INTRODUCTION

Not many people are familiar with the profession of landscape architecture, but for our class of 18, it is the career path that we chose to pursue here at Purdue. All of us come from diverse backgrounds, but we have found that we all want to be stewards of the earth, shaping the land for people and shaping people for the land. Once our education is complete, the projects within our field are always for specific clients. While in school, many of our projects are theoretical, being designed for the purpose of education. However, our LA325—Planting Design II class allowed us our first chance at having an actual client, the Progressive Community Church of Gary, Indiana. This class involves studying how the aesthetics and functional uses of the plants within our landscape can be explored and how natural distribution and ecological considerations must be taken into specific role of attracting pollinators. The pastors of Progressive Community Church, Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker, have taken on the role of rejuvenating their community starting with their own property. With a recently acquired piece of land, their request was for our class to create potential ideas for a garden space that focuses on pollination. After meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker and Tony, one of the church members who has taken on this

project, our class was able to hear the needs and wants of this new space account when designing the landscape. Given the topics of this class, being tasked with creating a pollination garden truly tested our ability to utilize plant species that would perform successfully, and we were able to use our design education to create 18 different potential solutions that provide the type of space they are looking to create.

GARY AND THE PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Over the years, the city of Gary has progressed into a desolate area that has become abandoned due to economic problems. In the past, Gary was home to many steel factories, but the growing competition in the steel industry overseas left many employees without work—only 5,100 employees were a part of U.S. Steel Gary Works in 2015 compared to the 30,000+ who were employed 45 years prior. According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of Gary as of 2017 was 76,008 people—a 21% decrease from the population of 96,691 from 10 years prior. Within the surrounding blocks of the church itself, there are only two homes currently occupied. The church's neighborhood is also considered a food desert, meaning it is difficult for

Figure 1. An existing greenhouse of Faith Farms.

anyone living in the community to purchase affordable or good-quality, fresh food.

Seeing the untapped potential of the city, Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker left behind their lives in Chicago, relocated to Indiana, and started the Progressive Community Church. Once settled in their new community, they began brainstorming potential ideas to combat the aforementioned problems that plagued the city. One of their ideas that they already have begun implementing is Faith Farms (Figure 1), which is the production of food on their property that is both given away to community members and sold to local markets. With more and more food being produced every year, they have really run with this idea and have decided to take their next step—the Pollination Garden.

MEETING THE CLIENT

Before we began the design process, we took a class trip up to Gary to meet the members of the church and see the current site's conditions so that we would be able to create appropriate solutions that would adhere to the church's ideas. I am not from Indiana and I had never been to Gary. Before driving up, many of my classmates were telling me about the stereotypes surrounding the city. Hearing the negative comments that many people were saying left me unsure as to how one space would be able to change the community.

During our visit we met with Pastor LaShawn and Tony, who provided us with all of the information we needed to begin and took us on a tour of the church's property, specifically focusing on the site for the garden. Pastor LaShawn explained her and her husband's story of

deciding to leave Chicago, where they both had successful businesses, and move to Gary to start a new chapter of their lives. Both the pastor and Tony shared their aspirations when it comes to the church and their 20-year plan to reinvigorate their community and provide a lasting impact that will benefit today's residents and future generations.

Our class had never directly met with the clients of a project before, aside from our professors acting as clients for theoretical projects. Having this meeting was extremely beneficial and provided an insight into the need for this project that we wouldn't have been able to understand from only reading a project statement on a piece of paper. That being said, past projects that used a project statement have been undoubtedly straightforward with the parameters clearly outlined. Having the aforementioned meeting truly was a challenge to all of us. We were now responsible for sifting through all of the information being spoken and deciding for ourselves what key elements were the most important. I think my classmates would agree that the project would have been simpler had the client simply written their requirements down on a sheet of paper and given us their exact criteria, but that's not how our profession works once we leave the classroom. Having our client be unaware of our process, though challenging, allowed us to face the tasks of forming our own "project statements" that reflected what we thought was truly important.

As mentioned earlier, I was unsure as to how one idea would be able to make a substantial impact on their community; however, Pastor LaShawn and Tony convinced me just how impactful passion and determination can be to improve an entire neighborhood. The two of them, along with Pastor Curtis Whittaker, believe that they have a group of visionaries, not just dreamers working to implement these ideas. Describing themselves, everyone involved with this process is a visionary: a person who not only sees the idea, but also acts to make that idea happen.

DESIGN IMPACT

Given the name of the project, the overarching theme of this garden space is for it to be a pollination hub. Creating a space centered around pollination brings a larger insect population, including beehives, to the property, allowing them to pollinate the garden itself and also the produce plants within Faith Farms. This Pollination Garden will also serve as an educational opportunity for the church members and visiting students. The church often hosts activity days for members and neighborhood

Figure 2. A sample list of plants for pollinators.

schools, so this new space will provide another chance for learning to take place.

Creating a pollination garden takes specific knowledge, which is why the church chose to reach out to our program for assistance. In these types of projects, the plant palette becomes the most important detail of the design. There are certain plants that appeal more to pollinators than others based on their color and pollen location, meaning that not all plants are suitable for this kind of garden. Plants that have warm-colored flowers are typically more appropriate because they are more attractive to pollinators. Some of the plants that fall into this category include red maples, blanket flowers, and bee balm. Incorporating the appropriate plants is the key to creating a successful pollination garden (Figure 2).

Aside from the pollination aspect of the garden, the members of the church also wanted to create an oasis for the community. They asked that we create a welcoming and safe space so that all members of the neighborhood feel comfortable visiting any time, whether it's for pleasure or education. Incorporating some signage and a clear entryway is important because it encourages people to come in and enjoy the space. Safety is also a major concern, and they asked that we make the majority of the garden visible from the streets so that there isn't any place for unwanted activity. Creating a safe space also ensures that children will feel at ease when in the garden, whether visiting for school or with their family.

LEAVING A LASTING LEGACY

When designing, it was extremely important to all of us that we create a space that benefits both current and future generations. It's important to the church that all

members of the community want to visit this space and that the garden will become a place that families share with their children. It was also important that the garden have an aspect of sustainable beauty, meaning that the vegetation and ecosystem will continue to flourish and become even stronger as the years go on while beautifying the community.

One of the main goals of this garden is to encourage the members of the community to engage in at-home gardening. Providing this space along with Faith Farms will provide a learning environment where visitors can learn about and potentially incorporate these ideas into their own gardens, whether they take on the task of encouraging pollination or growing produce. By inspiring the community, the church hopes that they will create an eco-community, making Gary an inspiration for future cities to take advantage of natural resources and the passion within their communities to rejuvenate their own neighborhoods.

CREATION AND PRESENTATION

After processing all of the information given to us, it was now time to put everything together and begin putting our ideas into motion. Preliminary concept drawings started coming together, with inspiration for my own design coming from a painted greenhouse door that was part of Faith Farms (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The inspiration behind the design.

The beginning process of design involved sifting numerous iterations of different layouts to figure out which one would be optimal for incorporating the needs of the church. After several planning and review sessions with peers and our professor, a final design was decided on and the final step of visually portraying the ideas in a full-color graphic could begin. The production of the graphic itself is also extremely iterative and takes some reworking throughout the process before it becomes an effective graphic that demonstrates your ideas to your client.

HOW ONE COMMUNITY CAN INFLUENCE DESIGN

It's clear to see how driven Pastor LaShawn, Pastor Curtis, and Tony are about this vision, but there is also overwhelming support coming from all of the city. The Legacy Foundation is one outside organization that has taken an interest in the ideas of the Progressive Community Church. They are a nonprofit organization that provides "support to local leaders to help solve problems and enhance residents' quality of life." They have set up donations and grant money that has been awarded to the Whittakers and the church to help them make their vision a reality. As expected, the church has also generated numerous volunteers who show up week after week to help with these projects every step along the way. The entire neighborhood has also reached out, whether with direct donations or material donations, because they believe in the vision that the church sees for the city. As mentioned before, numerous local schools also visit the church to see the kind of work they are doing for the community, creating a larger network of awareness.

Seeing the dedication and commitment coming from the numerous sources mentioned above made me want to work even harder to create a design that suited the needs of the church. As mentioned earlier, it's a rare opportunity for us, as students, to be able to work directly with a client, and this opportunity is one that truly is invaluable. The amount of support that the church has from the entire city is amazing, and I believe that our designs will enable them to take different ideas and implement them in the near future.

WHY/HOW LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

As Landscape Architecture students, we are constantly learning more about what it takes to be a successful designer, and getting this opportunity allowed us to see just how much our profession can help a client and an entire community.

Figure 4. Kelli's design for the Pollination Garden.

One of the key aspects of our profession is the ability to define space and create a sense of place. We have the ability to respond to the needs and wants of the client and users to make a space that serves its community in the best way possible. We are also able to do this using both natural and sustainable elements, given that most of our work utilizes plant material. While there are elements of the Pollination Garden and every project we encounter that will be constructed out of hardscape material, those elements will be made as environmentally friendly as possible. Not only do we create these spaces, but we also bring people into them. We take the parameters provided by the client and listen to the community members to determine how we can make the most beneficial space possible. As designers, we also look at past projects to help us find an appropriate solution to the problem at hand. We can see what elements have worked with similar parameters before to help guide us through the design process.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Once the final projects were completed by our class, we had the opportunity to present them to Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker, Tony, and church member Sister Frida. Our presentations were conducted with open dialogue, allowing us to hear feedback from everyone as we were

presenting. Having presentations act as an open platform allowed each student to have more of a conversation with our clients and engage one-on-one. Our clients were extremely happy with the ideas our class had cumulatively given them through our work, demonstrated by the extreme gratitude that they continued to show throughout the entirety of the day. The main goal was to give them a starting point—a few key ideas that they can take and run with—and that’s exactly what we were able to provide. They are now able to take what they liked and decide what they see for the future of their Pollination Garden. Along with giving them the ideas, the graphics that each student produced allowed them to visually see the possibilities (Figure 4). Often it’s difficult to visualize the space that you’re trying to create, and seeing 18 different solutions will help them move forward since they can now see their plans as a reality. The church will not be taking the one design that they liked the best and building an exact replica; instead, they will take the inspiration that the graphics provided and create the best solution for them. By coming to Purdue and asking for assistance in undertaking this project, the Progressive Community Church opened themselves up to new ideas that will lead them one step closer to the completion of their Pollination Garden.

STUDENT IMPACT

The entire process of working with the Progressive Community Church was one that was very beneficial to my experience as a student in Landscape Architecture. As mentioned, it’s not often that, as students, we get the opportunity to work with an actual client and see our work impact others. Being given the opportunity to provide Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker and all the members of the church with new ideas about how to turn what they imagined for a pollination garden into a reality is one that I greatly appreciated. I think it was a daunting task due to our lack of experience with clients, but I believe that having our professors act in a similar way on previous projects did provide us with the knowledge that we needed to interact in a positive manner with the church members. We knew which questions to ask and what we needed to know before really diving into the project. One difficulty was the fact that the church is located in Gary, Indiana, giving us only the one opportunity to interact with our client before the final presentations. We were able to ask them questions through e-mail if they came up, but having an in-person conversation to discuss progress is always preferred. An improvement to the experience would be to integrate another meeting with the client to discuss our ideas earlier in the

design process so that we could get some feedback prior to the final presentations. Having this chance would allow us to mold our designs even more to the client’s ideas. Any future work with the Progressive Community Church is unknown at this time, but I hope that, given their satisfaction with our final ideas, they would reach out again to our Landscape Architecture program with any future projects that we would be able to help with. Overall, being able to work on this project made me realize just how much of an impact landscape architects can have in a community. The impact of our work has been spoken about before, but it wasn’t until we were able to work with a real client with a true vision that the impact became visible. We brought a small piece of their dream to life and gave them the ability to visualize what the future holds in store for Progressive Community Church. Being able to see this happen because of work that I was a part of was more beneficial than I could have imagined.

CONCLUSION

This project gave us the chance to work closely with a client and further develop the communication skills needed to effectively design for a client as well. Our designs provided multiple solutions that the Progressive Community Church will be able to use when they choose to construct their Pollination Garden. As students, we will not be involved with decisions relating to the construction of the garden, but we can provide any further help if questions or concerns arise in relation to our profession. A design that took us only three weeks to complete will provide years and years of benefits to the Gary community. Being able to see the impact we have as design students gives a glimpse of how impactful our profession can be.

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